

Passion Play Conference 14th February 2012

Brompton Oratory London

Alex Stewart-Clark of the Passion Trust welcomed everyone to the conference and thanked Father Julian and the Brompton Oratory for the use of the premises.

Alex introduced Sir Jack Stewart-Clark, producer of the Life of Christ Plays, Glasgow, Dundas Castle, Scotland and the Louisiana Penitentiary Play

Sir Jack explained the outline of the conference and introduced the first speaker, Peter Hutley of Wintershall, Guildford and Trafalgar Square Passion Plays.

Peter Hutley: Traditional Passion Plays and why we should do them.

Peter likened everyone at the conference as missionaries bringing the gospel to those who don't know anything about Jesus, just as the those missionaries took Christianity to Africa and India.

Each play will be individual, directed and enthused by dynamic people. It must be local for a village, town or city. It must be entertaining to keep the audience interested, they will then become inquisitive about Jesus. Young people enjoy it and their confidence improves through acting and public speaking. Volunteers become a family and that is what brings them back year after year. Many of the young soldiers are now disciples and there have been marriages and even babies over the years.

Wintershall started from small beginnings and has had difficulties over the years with casting, costumes etc, but now attracts an audience of 4 – 6,000. Two performances in Trafalgar Square reach about 40,000 people. Publicity is the one thing that you must get right and get the message out to the public.

Peter encouraged those who were producing and directing other passion plays. He reminded them that the major thing was that once the plays have started, they must continue. Every city, town and village should put on their own play and inspire others to continue. The more this is done the better the world will be.

Sir Jack thanked Peter Hutley and introduced Suzanne Lofthus. Director of Cutting Edge Theatre, Director of Auchtermuchty, Dundas, Edinburgh, Glasgow and Louisiana Passion Plays.

Suzanne Lofthus: Modern Interpretations on Passion Plays

Suzanne advised people to find their space and make their play work in that space using the natural surroundings. Accept the imperfections and take plays out to the market place and the gospel to the people. She advised that people should think why they are doing the play and who they are doing it for. A modern version of the play works in Glasgow but would not work in Edinburgh.

Historically it has been about the Church recognising that people are illiterate and took the dramatisation out into the community. In essence today there is the same problem communicating the gospel because we have a spiritually illiterate society. The Church is more

inward-looking and programme oriented, people are not coming into the Church and the message needs to be taken out to them.

Sir Jack thanked Suzanne and introduced Professor Jolyon Mitchell from the University of Edinburgh who kindly agreed to say a few words.

Professor Jolyon Mitchell: Variations of Passion Plays

Jolyon spoke about the variations in good Passion Plays. Some have more emphasis on the Resurrection for instance and others not so. Each one is different and the interpretation is personal to each member of the audience. Sometimes plays with some mistakes have more impact.

After dinner Sir Jack chaired the Open Discussion Forum.

Writers, scripts and copyright issues:

James Burke-Dunsmore spoke about the need to “go back to the scripture” and Suzanne Lofthus spoke about the need to get “under the skin” of the text and think about what it would have been like to be there and that by staying true to the text brings it all to life.

Promenade plays were discussed and create a connection with the audience wanting to follow him. It is important to invest in the character of Jesus.

Sharon O’Leary from Andover said that they put on plays in the local theatre for those who may be disabled and cannot stand and watch outside. This is very popular and they now put on two performances which are very well attended.

Funding grants and applications:

Douglas Guthrie, fundraiser for the Passion Trust, raised the question of putting together large applications (possible Arts Council) with statistics and information from a number of different passion plays round the country. Larger grants could then be shared out among the different plays.

Alex reiterated that the role of the Passion Trust was to support passion plays round the country and one of the ways to do this was to provide resources to communities and churches through such applications.

In making applications for large grants, it was noted that the process could take years and that applications should focus on Education, Community Theatre and the Arts. Suzanne Loftus said Arts Council is very hard to get funding from, and could take a couple of years, but if we collated statistics from each of the local plays and described them as ‘community plays’ there might be more leverage. She said her previous applications had focussed on ‘community theatre’ - ‘what other applications are based on such large casts and audiences?’

Sir Jack said previous funding for Dundas Life of Christ had been specific in approaching businesses for buses to transport audiences (travel). He also said it is important for Trustees of funding bodies or business to come and see the plays for themselves and encouraged people to extend invitations to them where possible.

There were so many stories of God's provision in many ways. It is also most important to be optimistic, joyful and full of faith.

Fund-raising and sponsorship:

Funding was discussed at length.

It was felt that the people needed to own their plays and raise money themselves, through cake sales, teas and parties, jumble sales etc. Sharon O'Leary said the prayer was very strong and they have not had to do any fundraising. Suzanne said that you must have faith moments when the money fails. But the plays can still be put on. Some plays are put on for as little as £5000.

It was agreed that the plays should be free events and many found it hard to think about going round with a bucket after a performance. It was agreed that people should join in without tickets but that there should be opportunities for people to donate through a website later if they wanted to. Putting tickets on a Just Giving website or having a programme with advertisements was also discussed.

It was agreed that it is important to encourage faith-based people or companies to support the play by giving support with goods and services. It was agreed the biggest expense was the sound system. Fundraising can also be down to the people and their skills. Asking questions "Does anyone know someone who can provide..." and keep praying for these skills to come forward.

Other innovative ideas put forward for fundraising included:

- Advertising for local businesses
- Sponsorship
- Christian Arts Trust
- The 'one-hundred club', which could ensure a steady trickle of funds each month
- Showing that Play is already receiving investment and attracting financial support
- Another recommendation was to ask Churches to have one Sunday when the congregation are asked to donate towards the Passion Play

Alex Stewart-Clark closed the conference and said that minutes would be emailed to everyone, along with a list of contact details for those present.